

THE RANGE OF THE BISON IN WISCONSIN

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The former range of the bison (*Bison b. bison* Linn.) has been outlined by Allen¹, Hornaday², and Seton³. The distributional area in Wisconsin was approximated on the basis of a few references only. A more thorough investigation of the literature permits defining the range more accurately, but not to a degree commensurate with the labor involved.

A study of this nature would not be complete without giving consideration to vegetative conditions during the period when the bison abounded. The southern and western portions of Wisconsin were covered formerly, for the most part, with prairie and "oak openings." In fact, the northern edge of the bison range coincides surprisingly well with the Prairie post offices.*

The growth of timber during the past seventy-five years has obscured the former existence of an excellent bison habitat. The annual burning by the Indians maintained a region of prairies and open groves; so, for this reason, the map prepared by Chamberlin⁴ in 1882, on which the prairie areas are shown, does not give a true picture of early conditions.

The prairie region spread, in the interior of the state, as far north as Lake Winnebago. Père Dablon⁵, who was at the Mascoutin village on the Fox River in 1670-71, states that the prairie extended more than three hundred leagues in every direction. Though this extent is questionable, later travelers found almost continuous prairie from the site of the present city of Oshkosh to Portage. Col. Whittlesey⁶, who traversed the region in 1832, found, after crossing the Fox River at Lake Winnebago, a low rolling prairie that extended for fifty miles. This same region of prairies and oak openings was described in considerable detail by Capt. Marryat⁷ who called it "beautiful beyond description".

In actuality, the prairie was almost continuous from Lake Winnebago to the Illinois line. Mrs. Kinzie⁸, in March, 1831,

* Star Prairie, St. Croix Co.; Prairie Farm, Barron Co.; West Prairie, Vernon Co.; Prairie du Sac, Sauk Co.; Strong Prairie, Adams Co.; Rolling Prairie, Dodge Co.; and North Prairie, Waukesha Co.

journeyed from Fort Winnebago (Portage) to Chicago by way of Blue Mounds. After leaving Lake Mendota, the trail to Blue Mounds was over a rolling prairie. Thence her party went south for fifty miles over a prairie on which it "vainly hoped to see a distant fringe of timber". On the return journey, she also mentions that after leaving the Madison lakes, the party, to reach Fort Winnebago, crossed "Twenty-Mile Prairie" without a tree in sight.

The first recorded overland journey from Chicago to Prairie du Chien was made by Keating's party in 1823. It entered the state near Monroe, crossed the Military Ridge west of Blue Mounds, and proceeded to Prairie du Chien. Keating⁹ makes this significant statement: "The only defect which we observed in the country between Chicago and the Mississippi is the scarcity of wood, which is more seriously felt on the west side of Rock river than to the east of it." Incidentally, he remarks on the extreme scarcity of game.

A map¹⁰ of southwestern Wisconsin published by R. W. Chandler in 1829, states that not more than a tenth is covered with timber, in detached groves, the remainder being prairie. Daniels¹¹, the first state geologist, stated in 1854 that only one-third of southwestern Wisconsin was prairie. He gives, however, the reason for the rapid disappearance of the prairie: "An interesting and valuable feature may be mentioned in this connection, viz: The rapid growth of young trees from the soil of the open prairie, wherever the annual fires are shut off. Upon Judge Blackstone's farm, near White Oak Springs, we were shown dense groves of young trees, from six to ten inches in diameter, where, twenty-five years ago, not a shrub could be found larger than a riding whip. The same process may be seen in numerous localities, at various stages of advancement, from the prairie, covered with sprouts of oak, hickory, aspen, hazel, and sometimes maple, linden, and ash, to thick groves which have been growing for many years. . . . If proper precautions are taken to protect the surface from the fires, every farm upon these prairies will supply itself with timber in a few years."

Fixation of the range of the bison is complicated greatly by the loose terminology of the early French voyageurs. Some of the English translations add to the confusion, so that the French

texts should always be examined. Many writers have used *buf-fle*, *boeuf*, *boeuf sauvage*, and *vache sauvage* indiscriminately for the bison, moose (*Alces malchis*), and wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*). In general *élan*, *original* (*original*), or *oriniak* refers strictly to the moose. The wapiti was called *cerf*, *vache sauvage*, or stag (stag). *Cerf* would be fairly descriptive as it is the French name of the European stag or red deer. Michaux¹² states that the French and Canadians of Illinois call the American elk *cerf* and the white-tailed deer *chevreuil*. In Europe the *chevreuil* is the roebuck. It must be said that many of the French writers had a "boosting" spirit and wished to make the natural advantages of the country attractive by naming as many mammals as possible. Fortunately, it is an exceptional case in which any word other than *boeuf* can be translated bison for Wisconsin.

The range of the bison will be followed from the northwestern corner of the state, southeasterly to Lake Michigan. Schoolcraft¹³, in 1820, found buffalos in Minnesota where the Elk River empties into the Mississippi. They did not appear there in 1821, and the Chippewas stated that 1820 was the last year that these animals crossed to the east bank of the Mississippi. The place where the buffalos were found was 40 miles west of the Wisconsin boundary in latitude 45° 20'. Father Hennepin¹⁴, while a captive of the Sioux, was on the St. Croix River in 1680. He mentions an Indian grave near which the savages left a pot containing fat buffalo meat (*viande grasse de Vâches ou Taureaux Sauvages*).

It is highly probable, aside from historical evidence, that the bison ranged to the eastward of the St. Croix River. Schoolcraft¹⁵, in 1831, found that "the prairie country extends itself into the vicinity of Rice Lake (Barron Co.)," and that along the Red Cedar River the forests were interspersed with prairie.

The journeys of Radisson and Groseilliers are a geographical as well as a zoological problem. In his Third Voyage, 1658-1660, Radisson¹⁶ mentions the occurrence of "Buffs" about the lake of "ye Stinkings" (Michigan) and states that they come to the "upper lake" (Superior) but by chance. He gives a good description of the buffalo and mentions slaying it during the winter hunts. Careful reading of his voyage leads to the conclusion that his first experience with the buffalo was obtained on the

upper Mississippi, probably near the Bois Brulé-St. Croix waterway.

In the late fall of 1661, in the course of his Fourth Voyage, Radisson made an overland journey from Chequamegon Bay to Lake Namakagon, apparently, the Indians then scattering for the winter's hunts. In the beginning, game was abundant and he¹⁷ mentions the killing of "Oriniaks, staggs, wild cows, Carriboucks, fallow does and bucks". Some antiquarians have assumed that his *wild cows* were buffalos. For various reasons, it is most probable that he refers to the female wapiti. He and his associates in the course of the winter wander westward to the St. Croix and beyond, into the country of the Sioux. He then makes several references to their buffalo culture, always using the word "bufte" or a variant. Furthermore, while returning homeward from his Third Voyage his party killed "wild coves" on the Ottawa River, Canada, 30 leagues below the Calumet Rapids. The buffalo never occurred along the Ottawa. That the moose was not intended is shown by the fact that an *horiniack* was killed shortly afterwards. The cow moose is more mulish than bovine as attested by some of the early French travelers.

Bison were common in certain localities along the Mississippi River, from Lake Pepin to the Wisconsin River. Buffalo River in Buffalo County perpetuates their former abundance. Hennepin¹⁸ was the first to mention "*la Rivière des Taureaux Sauvages*," stating that it was so-called from the large number of buffaloes ordinarily found there. It was described as skirted by mountains, but these were sufficiently distant in places to leave prairies. The Indians with him made a hunt on this river. Returning, laden with meat, their women concealed it on the islands at the mouth of the stream. He also mentions buffalos at Lake Pepin (*à la pointe du Lac des pleurs*), and an occasion on which some sixty buffaloes with their young (*soixante Taur-eaux, ou Vâches Sauvages avec leurs veaux*) crossed a river. The side of the Mississippi on which they were found is not determinable. Pike¹⁹ mentions a Point de Sable projecting about a mile into the lake from the west side.

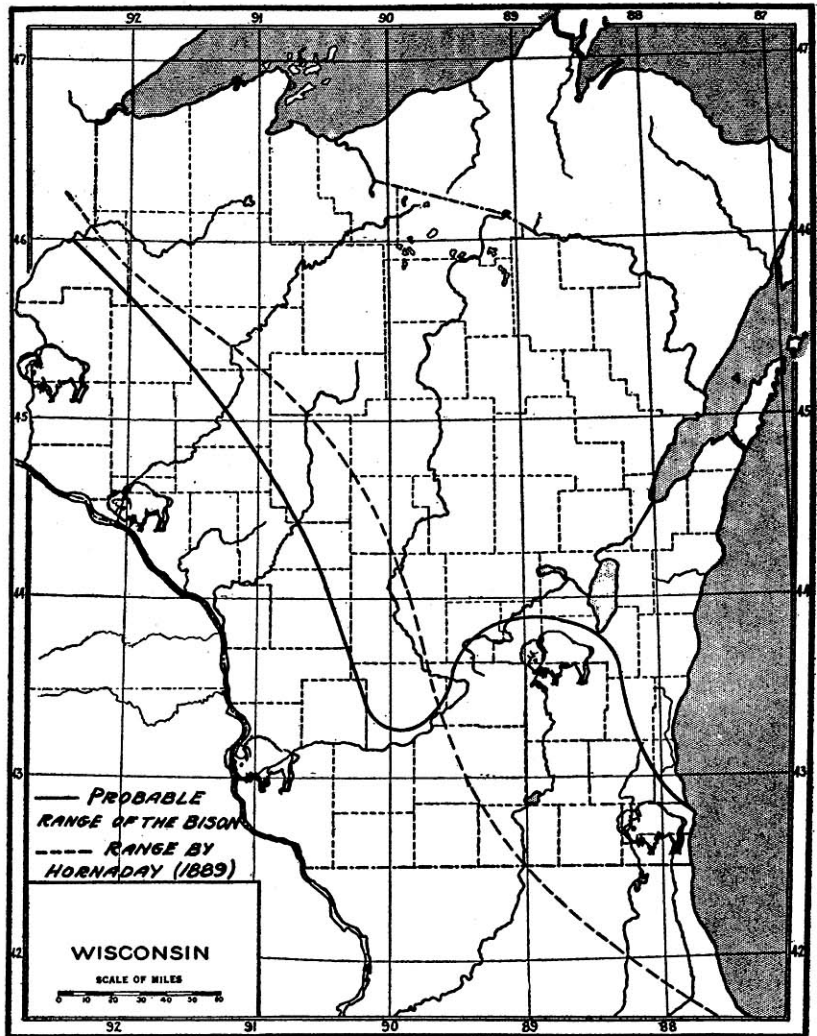
La Salle²⁰, in a letter written in 1682, mentions the "*Rivière des boeufs*" that owed its name to the large number of those animals found there. In 1699, Le Seur²¹ described a large, beau-

tiful river coming from a great distance, and flowing at its mouth from the north. This was called the Bon-Secours from the great number of bison (*boeufs*), wapiti (*cerfs*), bears, and deer (*chevreuils*) found there. This river has been identified with the present Chippewa River²², and from all the evidence, correctly so. It is difficult in some cases to decide whether the Buffalo or Chippewa River is intended, the two streams being about 10 miles apart where they enter the Mississippi. Hennepin states that his *Rivière des Taureaux* is a whole league from Lake Pepin (*une grande lieüe du Lac des pleurs*), so that it must have been the present Chippewa River.

A glance at a detailed map permits some interesting conclusions. About 12½ miles above the mouth of the Chippewa a branch known as Beef Slough leaves the river. This slough, known also as Boeuf Slough²³, even in modern times, curves to the southeast for 18 miles to join the Mississippi, thus forming with the main Chippewa a large delta. The present Buffalo River, that is only 30 yards wide at its mouth, empties into the lower end of Beef Slough 9½ miles below the main mouth of the Chippewa. Strictly speaking, the Buffalo River is accordingly a tributary of the Chippewa. More to the point is the fact that the voyageurs keeping to the main channel of the Mississippi would not be likely even to see the Buffalo, this river and the slough being relatively insignificant. It is apparent then that when Chippewa predominated as the name of the main stream, the slough and its tributary fell heir to *Boeuf*.

It would seem that both rivers had bison on the banks so that a further discussion of the names would not be in place. Long²⁴, in 1817, states that buffalos while not numerous on the "River au Boeuf" (Buffalo River) were still hunted there by the Indians at all seasons.

The Chippewa valley was unquestionably the greatest game region in the state. Carver²⁵ ascended the river in June, 1767, and observes "larger droves of buffaloes and elks" than in any other part of his travels. He describes the land along the river as very level for sixty miles and clothed with fine meadows. His account establishes the distance that the buffalo ranged to the eastward in this latitude. The country was almost devoid of timber up to Chippewa Falls, but rugged and heavily timbered beyond.



Range of Bison in Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Historical Society recently received from the library of McGill University a copy of the "Military Journal of Captain James Stanley Goddard made in 1766-7". He left Mackinac September 17, 1766 and stopped at the Sauk village in Sauk County. He remarks that the Sauk Indians are good hunters and have horses "which they use to hunt Buffalos on in the summer time". He accompanied Jonathan Carver on his voyage

up the Chippewa River. The journal contains the following entry for May 29, 1767: "This is a fine river . . .; there is plenty of animals, such as stag, deer, bear and buffalos, of which we killed every day one sort or other". Acknowledgment is made to the Society for their kind permission to use the above excerpts.

It is improbable that the bison occurred in the south-central part of the state. Here, the terrain is rugged and was well wooded. To the northward lay the "sand barrens."

The drawings of various animals in a cave near West Salem, La Crosse County, have been described by Brown²⁶. Two of the pictographs here reproduced (Pl. 1, figs. 1-2) unquestionably represent the bison. The technique indicates Siouan origin, though the quality is below that of some of their more modern paintings. The Sioux formerly occupied or claimed the east bank of the Mississippi from the mouth of the Wisconsin River to Mille Lacs, Minnesota.

Bison were found in numbers near the mouth of the Wisconsin River up to the latter part of the eighteenth century. B. W. Brisbois²⁷ was born and raised at Prairie du Chien. He was told by a Mrs. Cardinal (Cardinell), who came to Prairie du Chien about 1767, that buffalos crossed the river in such numbers that it was necessary to wait for the hordes to cross before a canoe could pass safely. La Salle²⁸, writing under date of Aug. 22, 1682, expresses his concern that Du Luth may interfere with the fur trade that he is establishing on the Wisconsin "on account of the great number of buffaloes (*boeufs*), which are taken there every year, almost beyond belief."

There is no specific reference to the bison on the Wisconsin River between Prairie du Chien and Portage. Marquette²⁹, in his memorable journey from Green Bay to the Mississippi in 1673, states that while on the Wisconsin River, he saw no small game or fish, but many deer (*chewëilz*), and a large number of "cows" (*Vaches*). Shea³⁰ translates *Vaches* as moose and states that it is clearly a mistake to assume that bison is intended.* His argument is based on the fact that Marquette does not mention the bison until he arrives on the Mississippi in latitude 41° 28'. Marquette gives then a description of the bison under the name

* It is just as great a mistake to translate the word as moose for the lower Wisconsin is far below the former range of this species.

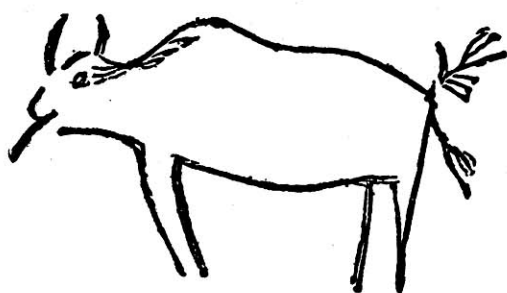


FIG 1 .

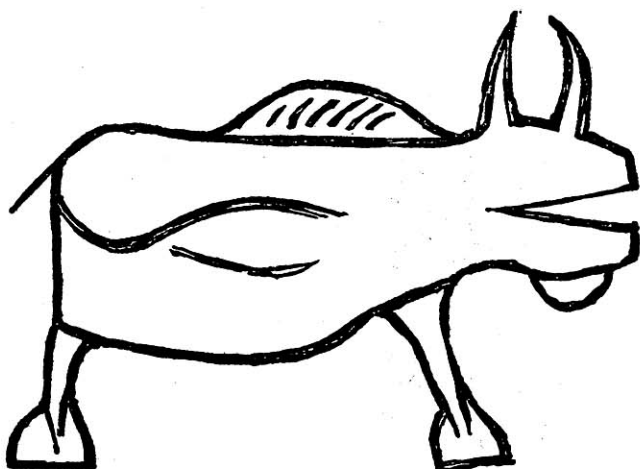
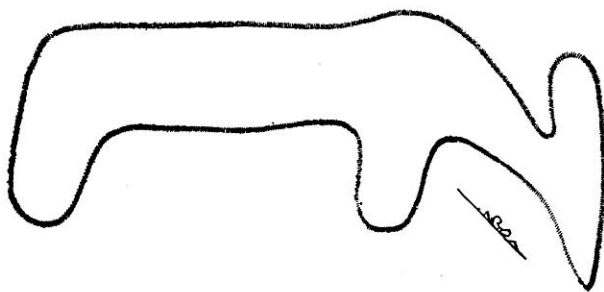


FIG. 2.



On Sep. 7. T. P. R. G.

Nº 2.

Fig. 3.

FIGS. 1 and 2. Bison Pictographs, LaCrosse Co.
FIG. 3, Bison Mound, Sauk Co.

*pisikiou*** or *boeufs sauvages*. On Marquette's map the bison is *Boeuf sauvage*.

It is likely that the *vaches* seen by Marquette on the Wisconsin River were wapiti, even though he later speaks of bison, wapiti, and kids (*boeufs, cerfs, chevreux*)³¹. Dablon's Relation³² was probably available to Marquette before he set out on his voyage. Dablon was at the Mascoutin village, modern Berlin³³, on the Fox River, in 1670-1671. In describing the prairies south of Lake Winnebago he mentions that "wild cows" (*vaches sauvages*) are encountered not infrequently in herds of four and five hundred each. He must refer here to the American elk, considering the size of the herds, and the fact that he immediately proceeds to describe in detail the bison occurring in the same locality. Dablon was the first to use the name *pisikiou* as a synonym for the buffalo (*buffle*).

There are several other references to the occurrence of the bison in the region south of Lake Winnebago. Allouez³⁴, writing of his journey to Lake Superior, 1665-1667, states that the Outagamie live southward towards the lake of the Ilmouek (Michigan), in a country favorable to the hunting of wapiti (*Cerf*), bison (*Boeuf sauvage*), and other animals. When he actually visited these Indians in 1670, he found them living on the Wolf River. He does not mention the bison again, but states that large and small stags (*grandes et petits Cerfs*), bears, and beavers are found in abundance.

Perrot³⁵ visited the Wisconsin tribes in 1666 and mentions the bison in several cases. He states that shortly after the Indians had formed a new settlement near Green Bay, they went to hunt bison (*Boeufs*) and returned in a fortnight loaded with meat and grease. Since it took the French five days to reach the Mascoutin village (Berlin), it is safe to assume that the hunt was made on the prairies south of Lake Winnebago. The Indians could scarcely have gone farther, killed the game, and returned in the time specified. After reaching the Mascoutin village, Perrot mentions that he was seated on a painted bison robe "the hair of which was softer than silk." His food was seasoned with bison fat (*graisse de boeuf*), and he left his gun with the Indians in order that they might use it to hunt bison.

** Mr. M. W. Stirling of the Bureau of American Ethnology has informed me that *pisikiou* is evidently intended for the Menominee word *pisähkiw*, meaning buffalo. The plural form is *pisähkiwük*.

While voyaging up the Fox River in 1690-1691, Perrot³⁶ was presented with a bison (*boeuf*) and some maize that were of great assistance to the Frenchmen on their journey to the Mississippi. De Beauharnois^{36a}, in May, 1730, writes that the allied Ottawas, Sauteurs, Menominees, and Winnebagoes destroyed twenty flatboats of Foxes returning from a buffalo hunt.

Their former presence was mentioned by travelers in the region as late as 1837³⁷. Richard Dart's family, the first to settle at Green Lake, took up a claim south of the lake in 1840, when he was twelve years of age. In 1906, he stated: "We saw no buffalo, but their wallows and chips and horns were visible, and seemed recent. [Pierre] Le Roy* said that he had seen these prairies black with buffalo^{37a}."

The lakes formed by the widening of the upper Fox River were known on the early French maps as the Wild Rice Lakes (*Lacs de Folles Avoines*). The first reference that has been found to *Lac du Boeuf*, the present Buffalo Lake, is in 1777-1778³⁸. The French name of this lake was used also by Featherstonhaugh³⁹ who traversed it in 1835. William Powell⁴⁰ (1810-1885), who was interviewed in 1877, states that the Buffalo Lake region was a great buffalo range in early times. The oldest Menominee living had never seen buffalos in Wisconsin. Iometah, an aged Menominee, who died about 1867, and others stated that their fathers had killed and driven them off.

The discoveries of Recent and fossil remains of the bison are distinctly limited. Hay⁴¹ received from Dr. S. Weidman, State Geologist, a humerus, classed as Recent, found in a marsh near Oshkosh. This indicates that the bison may have ranged to the northern end of Lake Winnebago on the western shore.** Recent bones have also been found on the site of the old French post near Trempealeau⁴².

The bison remains found by Whitney⁴³ in a lead crevice at Blue Mounds, Dane county, appear to belong to an extinct species. Of exceptional interest is the recent discovery of the remains of approximately forty *Bison b. oliverhayi* in a peat bog in

* It would be possible to approximate the date of the disappearance of the bison if the date of Pierre Le Roy's birth were known. He was in the Kinzie party in their journey to Chicago in 1831. Mrs. Kinzie speaks of him as "young" Roy.

** In 1765 there was published in London, "A Concise Account of North America", by Major Robert Rogers. In describing Green Bay, page 164, he mentions the tall grass growing between the trees and adds: "This invites hither the greatest plenty of deer, elks, buffalos, wild cows, bears, beavers," The work is obviously a compilation and there is no historical evidence that the author had first hand knowledge of the country west of Mackinac.

the St. Croix watershed⁴⁴. No bones of *Bison b. bison* were found with them.

The Winnebagoes are of Siouan linguistic stock, but are not known to have resided outside of the Wisconsin region. The stronghold of the tribe was in the Lake Winnebago district. They first became known to the whites in 1634 when Nicollet found them at Green Bay. Though culturally a distinctly timber people, the Winnebagoes had a buffalo clan, and their most important ceremony was the buffalo dance. Thwaites⁴⁵, in 1887, interviewed Moses Paquette, interpreter for the Wisconsin Winnebagoes, who described the buffalo dance as still the tribe's most popular ceremony.

No reference was found to the occurrence of the bison in life in extreme southern Wisconsin though conditions were very favorable for their existence in abundance. There are no accounts of whites traversing this section prior to 1800. It remained a *terra incognita* due to being off the main waterways. The water routes followed by the French were the Fox-Wisconsin to the Mississippi and the Lake Michigan shore to Chicago. While the identification of effigy mounds leaves much to the imagination, the occurrence of "buffalo" mounds on the southern prairies is of some significance. Lapham⁴⁶ has described, among others, two buffalo mounds along Honey Creek, at the edge of the Sauk prairie, Sauk County. One of the mounds is shown as Fig. 3 (Pl. I). He considered the animals to be grazing in an attitude "quite spirited and natural." The list of the mammals of Sauk County published by Canfield⁴⁷ contains the following brief reference: "*Buffalo*.—Had all left before the country was purchased of the Indians."

A group of six animal mounds in single file was described by Taylor⁴⁸ in 1838. The group was situated in Dane County eighteen miles west of Madison and seven miles east of Blue Mounds. He seems to have made a careful survey but is in doubt as to the animal that the figures are intended to represent. He decided in favor of the buffalo, because of its former abundance in the surrounding prairie. In 1836, Featherstonhaugh⁴⁹, after leaving Blue Mounds, saw on the prairie "seven buffalo mounds, each representing distinctly, the head, horns, neck, fore and hind legs, body, and tail of that animal." In spite of certain discrepancies in the drawings, there is no doubt but that this was the same group surveyed by Taylor. Taylor's animals resemble

the bear, while Featherstonhaugh's drawings are too distinctly bovine to be credible.

It is stated by T. V. Kumlien⁵⁰, in a private paper now in the possession of Mr. Angie Kumlien Main of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, that the early settlers found buffalo horns in the vicinity of Lake Koshkonong. There were no permanent settlements in Jefferson County, prior to 1835, so that the existence of horns at this date would indicate that the buffalo did not disappear from the region prior to 1800.

Marquette⁵¹, in the course of his last voyage, skirted the western shore of Lake Michigan. He mentions, on Nov. 27, 1674, that after proceeding about three leagues from "the river" (Milwaukee) he found savages who had killed some bison (*boeufs*). This would be in the vicinity of Racine. Marquette is consistent in his use of *boeuf*, and there is no doubt that he refers to bison. Proceeding on to the Chicago River, his men, Pierre and Jacques, killed three bison.

It is surprising that the bison was found so long in Wisconsin in view of the fact that it was almost extinct east of the Mississippi prior to 1815. Hoy⁵² states on the authority of Governor Dodge that buffalos were killed on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix River the year following the close of the Blackhawk war. This would be 1833. Lapham⁵³ states that the buffalo was seen last east of the Mississippi in 1832. Agreement is good as to the date of extinction for Sibley⁵⁴ reports that the Sioux Indians killed two bison on the Trempealeau River in 1832. There is a melancholic reflection in his words: "They are believed to have been the last specimens of the noble bison which trod, or will ever again tread, the soil of the region lying east of the Mississippi river".

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